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AUTHOR Noble, Judith A.
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ABSTRACT

Readers theatre can be an effective means of engaging children in responding to and studying literature in an enjoyable manner. It allows children time to master a part so they will be able to interpret passages instead of reading a new passage each time without practice or thoughtful consideration of the character or mood. It requires an understanding of what is being read and allows emphasis on plot sequence. Other advantages of readers theatre include forcing students to use their imaginations instead of props, motivating students (readers and hearers) to read an entire selection, providing an opportunity for self-conscious children to take part in group response activities, creating opportunities to study the part that elements other than words have to play in an interpretation, and helping students relate to an audience. Short materials with strong characterization, maximum conversation, minimum description, and a definite mood are best for readers theatre. Material can be adapted by rewriting to eliminate the "saids" while putting specific actions or interpretations in parentheses. Productions can be staged simply and the presentation taped or videotaped for a critique. (TJ)

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READERS THEATRE: ORAL READING WITH A PURPOSE

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Judith A. Noble
Associate Professor
Elementary Education
The University of Akron
Akron, Ohio 44325

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READERS THEATRE: ORAL READING WITH A PURPOSE

While Readers Theatre has been viewed primarily as a means of adults presenting literature to children, it can in fact be an effective means of engaging children in responding to and studying literature in an enjoyable manner.

As defined by Coger and White, the goal of Readers Theatre "is to present a literary script with oral interpreters using their voices and bodies to suggest the intellectual, emotional, and sensory experiences inherent in the literature."[1] In effect, this definition encompasses many of the goals of the elementary literature and/or reading program.

ORAL READING

"Read with expression" is a phrase heard often in elementary classrooms with results varying from a continuous drone to overly dramatic pronouncements of such intensity that poor Spot has to slink away in mortal terror after hearing "Out, Spot." Reading aloud with expression is indeed an art; an art that many people fail to master judging by adults reading aloud in various situations. While not a cure-all, Readers Theatre can be an aid in teaching and practicing oral reading. It has several advantages. Most importantly, there is an immediate purpose for reading with expression. It's not just "taking turns reading with expression because some day you'll need it"; rather, it's "practice reading this part so the group production will be the best we can make it."

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[1]Coger, Leslie Irene and White, Melvin R. READERS THEATRE HANDBOOK, Revised Edition. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and and Co., 1973. p. 3.

Along with this is the idea that in Readers Theatre children are given time to master a part so that they will be more able to interpret the passages instead of reading a new passage each time without practice or thoughtful consideration of the character or mood. They will have time to achieve success or a "finished" product. Reaching the finished product will eventually take less time so that the benefits derived from the practice in Readers Theatre will carry over into oral reading in general.

Success can also be achieved more quickly because each reader has only one part or one character to keep in mind. This simplifies matters by eliminating switching from one character's interpretation to another, and allowing for a more in-depth study of a part.

Because parts are of varying length, short parts can be given to children having difficulty so that they can master 2 or 3 lines, be a part of the group, and achieve success rather than having whole passages to stumble through.

And since the teacher or another very good reader can take the narrator's part, a model of good oral reading can be introduced in an immediate setting.

LITERARY STUDY

Basic to reading with expression is an understanding of what is being read. The study of characterization is an especially important facet of Readers Theatre and of comprehension. In order to interpret the words spoken by the character, the reader must know the character so well that

he can assume the moods, inflections, etc. implicit in that character or in the passage. A few guiding questions or comments can help a child respond to characters, and understand why they act or speak as they do.

Plot sequence is another aspect that can be emphasized. In putting the actions of the characters together the story must proceed in a logical sequence in order to make sense. Children will need to be aware of this sequence in order to know when to speak or move if that is included.

OTHER ADVANTAGES

Readers Theatre has several added advantages. The production is not involved because you don't need props, costumes, etc. It takes relatively little space so even crowded classrooms can be used.

Since there are no props or costumes viewers and participants are forced to use their imaginations and become involved in creative reading.

It is a good way for one group of children to share a literary selection with another and perhaps motivate a few other children to read the entire selection.

It provides an opportunity for children during self-conscious stages to take part in group response activities without the withdrawal sometimes found from creative drama or formal plays.

It creates opportunities to study the part that elements other than words have to play in interpretation. A few leading questions about how a sad or mad child would stand can bring out the importance of stance, gestures, facial expressions, etc.

Holding a book so that it doesn't become a barrier is an added lesson in Readers Theatre. Relating to the audience is an important aspect of oral reading and one that is frequently overlooked.

SELECTING AND ADAPTING MATERIALS

Literature with strong characterization, maximum conversation, minimum description and a definite mood is usually best for Readers Theatre with children. The number of speaking parts might influence your choice depending on whether you want large group or small group participation. Smaller groups are sometimes easier to work with but larger groups obviously involve more students in the oral reading process.

Shorter books can be used in their entirety but chapters from longer books can be equally effective. Anthologies of children's literature are a good source for chapters of books since those passages have already been selected on the basis of being able to stand alone with a minimum of explanation about the rest of the book.

To adapt the material, it is sometimes easiest to rewrite it in script format eliminating "he saids" but including in parentheses directions as to how it was spoken (growled, muttered).

Direction for specific actions or interpretations can also be included in parentheses. Children will learn to read around these interruptions.

The descriptive passages are assigned to the narrator. Some of these may be omitted if they are not necessary to the flow of the story.

The finished script can be placed in manila folders for ease in handling and a uniform appearance.

STAGING THE PRODUCTION

The first step after selecting the material is to have the children read the entire script silently to learn the flow of events, the important parts, the characteristics and moods of the story, etc. The teacher can read it aloud; however, this can have the effect of influencing the interpretation with students imitating rather than interpreting. This is not necessarily bad if you are just introducing this technique.

The second step is to have students select parts. They may feel they can be one character more effectively than another. They should have this choice. For example, the shy child may want a quiet part; he/she may also want to be the opposite. A very quiet student, after choosing to be the bone in William Steig's THE AMAZING BONE, said "I could never talk like that for real." But she did an excellent job of interpreting the part and perhaps benefited from the outburst.

After they've chosen parts comes individual practice by themselves and then with a tape recorder to correct mistakes. Scripts may be marked to help them remember to emphasize or express certain parts.

Then comes group practice with everyone reading their parts until it moves smoothly.

After the students feel comfortable with the reading, a few gestures or movements may be added. These should be kept to a minimum for effectiveness. This is not drama.

Children may be seated or standing. They should not move off stage

when not part of the action but they do need to indicate this by lowering their heads, turning their backs, etc.

The group presentation may be taped or videotaped, if available, for one last critique, and the show is ready to be staged for other members of the class or other classrooms.

SUGGESTED TITLES

Carroll, Lewis. ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND. "A Mad Tea Party." Macmillan, 1866.

Fitzhugh, Louise. HARRIET THE SPY. "Harriet Changes her Mind." Harper and Row, 1964.

Flack, Marjorie. ASK MR. BEAR. Macmillan, 1932.

Haywood, Carolyn. EDDIE AND THE FIRE ENGINE. "Eddie Goes to Dancing School." Wm. Morrow and Co., 1949.

Juster, Norton. THE PHANTOM TOLLBOOTH. Random House, 1961.

McClockey, Robert. HOMER PRICE. "The Doughnuts." Viking, 1943.

Minarik, Else Holmelund. LITTLE BEAR books. Harper and Row.

Nordstrom, Ursula. THE SECRET LANGUAGE. "The Feast." Harper and Row, 1960.

Norton, Mary. THE BORROWERS. "Danger." Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc. 1952.

Steig, William. THE AMAZING BONE. Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1976

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